

## Too Good To Ignore

**Called to Growth**

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Everyone is trying to get ahead in the world and if a person is not trying to get ahead, he is at least trying to get by as best he can. That is how it has always been. It seems like it is always a struggle because the world is dog-eat-dog and nothing seems to come easily in the way we make our living. People have to try to figure out a way either to beat the system, if somehow they can, or to make the system work for them somehow.

Now this, in recent times, has spawned an industry of work and of career guidance counselors and self-help manuals and such things like that for those wanting to get a leg up or a push onto the career fast track in whatever it is that they are wanting to do with their life. My sister Sharon Onisick (she did not know she was doing this, at least I do not think she knew she was doing this), put me on the trail of one of these career counseling books. That is not because I am looking for a career advancement in any way, but because of this particular author's baseline advice about work. And his advice is somewhat in the same mold as that book that I have done a teen Bible study and now also a sermonette on: *Do Hard Things*, by those young twins that decided to make something of themselves, and they did hard things and have become fairly successful.

This book has a very similar premise to it. The book is titled, *So Good They Can't Ignore You*, and it is by a young man named Cal Newport. I believe he was 28 years old when he wrote the book. Despite his youth though, he actually has been in the field for a fairly long time. He has written books on preparing for college, becoming a superstar, straight A student, and succeeding in college. And I think his career in writing these books goes back to like 2005 or 2006. So he has been doing this sort of thing for a long time despite his youth.

His idea for the book began as a study to find if the common career advice, follow your passion, is actually correct, whether it works or not. He soon

found out that this cliché is not only flawed, but it can be hazardous, meaning that it can lead to a great deal of anxiety, a lot of stress. And another thing, it is a career killer; it is chronic job hopping because one is never satisfied wherever you go. You go to one place and this is not going to fulfill me and then you hop into another job and no, this is not going to fulfill me either. And this does not float my boat and this other thing does not help and I am getting nowhere. And they keep going from job to job to job, trying to fulfill their passion for what they are doing or what they want to do, and it just never materializes.

What he found was that contrary to common belief, people rarely have marketable passions. Think about this. You are 18 years old, you are 22 years old, and all you have done in your life is sit in front of a computer screen and play video games. Now, some people have made a career out of such things, but those people are few and far between. People who are excellent in the top, let us say 1% or half percent of computer skills, or maybe not that, but they have a great ability to market what other people come up with, or they are especially good at something like computer graphics and it gives them a line into the industry.

But that is the sort of thing that most young people have. That is their passion. It is for knitting or table tennis or something like Gregorian chant. How much money are you going to make out of Gregorian chant? I mean, it might be a passion, something that you really like, but it is not marketable as a career, you are not going to make very much money out of it, and most interests, even the ones that are most passionately pursued by somebody, play little part in how most people end up loving their work. It usually ends up being something else that makes them love their work.

So how do people end up loving their work, loving what they do?

To answer this question, Cal Newport spent a great deal of time with various people at the tops of their fields. These were top-flight musicians. In particular, one was a bluegrass musician who was a young man and he had risen meteorically to be considered one of the very best. And so he wanted to know, how did this kid basically get to where he was? He also interviewed organic farmers, venture capitalists, screenwriters, radio personalities, and others who had admitted to deriving great satisfaction from their work—and

that they were passionate about their work and passionate about where they were taking their work. He also researched the lives of other people who were very successful and passionate about their jobs and what they were going to do.

And I just said jobs—people like Steve Jobs. He was one that he did not interview because by the time he wrote this, Steve Jobs was dying or dead and so he could not get in touch with him. But Steve Jobs has a very public record and so it is very easy to go and see what he did. Now, the reason why he keyed in on Steve Jobs is because Jobs was the one that stood in front of the graduating class of, I believe it was Stanford University, and told them to follow their dreams, follow their passions, do what makes you happy. And so Newport decided he would go and see how Steve Jobs had gotten to where he is and to see if he had followed his passion to become the head of Apple and to have all this respect and a great deal of money, and it seemed like he had a passion for his work.

I will give you this example. I think it is a good one, and it shows that Newport is on the right track.

I believe Steve Jobs grew up in Silicon Valley, California, and like many young men there at the time (because this was where things were happening in the computer world at the time, and still is), he and a lot of his friends were, well just to put it plainly, they were electronic geeks. I mean, instead of going out and throwing a ball after they got home from school, these guys went and they worked on circuit boards and they went to electronics clubs and they gathered at electronics stores, and you and I would not want to be around them because all they did was talk electronics. Admittedly he started fairly early and had that background so that he could get into where he was eventually going to go. So he fiddled around with these circuit boards and other computer components with his friends.

But if we were to travel back in time to that point and asked him, "Hey Steve, how's it going? What is it that you really want to do, what is it that you're really passionate about in life?" He probably would have said, "I want to become a Buddhist monk. I'd really like to get into Eastern Mysticism and philosophy," because that is what he was really interested in at the time. This electronic stuff was just a sideline. It was kind of how he passed the time.

What he really liked was delving into Asian religions and he was actually on the cutting edge of that interest which was coming into the country just about at that time, maybe he was on the bleeding edge of it.

He went to school, he did go to Reed College in Portland, but he eventually dropped out of fulltime school. I believe he only lasted about six months, because it was not floating his boat. So he drops out of school, loses his shoes, and began walking around campus like some sort of Eastern guru-in-training, bumming meals at the local Hari Krishna place. He was not at all the person you might think that he would become. If you looked at him then you would have said, Well, he is either going to become a bum or a monk, one of the two, and not going to become this great leader of industry. But he needed cash. You cannot get very far in this country without a little bit of cash and he was not getting it by pan handling.

He eventually returned to Silicon Valley and he found a night job with Atari. Most of us remember the Atari company. So he had a little bit of spending money with his job there at Atari. And he and Steve Wozniak, who was a friend of his, still fiddled with electronics, and one day Steve Wozniak came up with a computer circuit board (it was mostly Steve Wozniak's work), and they showed it around to their friends in the electronics geek-hood there and they loved it. They thought this was great, this was a breakthrough, you ought to sell this to the local electronics store.

So Steve Jobs (he tended to be the public face of everything that they did), took the circuit board to this electronics store owner and the guy looked at it and saw what it can do. But he had more vision than Steve Jobs. He could see, being in the retail business, what such a thing was worth. And he handed it back to Jobs and said, "Steve, build a computer around this thing and I'll sell it." He said, "I'll sell it for 10 times more than you want to sell that one board." He wanted to sell the board for 50 bucks, so do the math. 500 bucks a computer. So that was how the first Apple computer was launched, as was, in just a short time, the Apple Corporation, and it also launched the storied and lucrative careers of both Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak.

Now, in this story, you did not find Steve Jobs being very passionate about electronics except for a little bit that he and Steve Wozniak did. His philosophy of work, what is known now as the Apple brand, the Apple way

of doing things, did not come about until years later; after most of a lifetime, most of the career of that man. It took a long time to establish all that and for him to get to that point. Well, it did not take long for him to make a lot of money, but it did take a bit longer for him to get the worldwide reputation where he could pretty much write his own way in the world.

His passion for what he did came later and this is what Newport concluded after, not only looking at Jobs' life, but also the lives of these other people, he found out that "love what you do and you will never work a day in your life," which is another version of "follow your passion," has it exactly backward. You do not have a passion and then love your work, it is the other way around. You ended up loving your work and out of that grows a passion for what you do. In most cases, it is not that passion breeds fulfilling work, but that fulfilling work sets the stage for passion about what you do.

And by fulfilling work I mean not just satisfying work because you can go out in the backyard and dig a hole and you can feel satisfied with the work you have done. But that is not going to give you a passion for digging holes. That is not what it is. But by satisfying work, I mean diligent, focused, and progressively higher, better, and more specialized work. It is a work that you enjoy doing because you get better and better at it and you start doing things that no one else can do, or that very few other people can do, and it gives you a lot of satisfaction of course, but it makes you passionate for what you are doing. It gives you a feeling of control. It gives you a feeling of creativity. It gives you a feeling of autonomy, because once you get to this point, very few people can do what you do. Then you can pretty much put your demands out and they will be fulfilled.

Newport says later in the book that he is talking about work that opens up opportunities for greater creativity, greater autonomy, and greater control over one's time, over one's working conditions, and what you create, what you put out. So you have control over your output as well.

Let us say, if you are working as a hack in some editorial shop and you are supposed to put out an article or whatever every day or two days. You do not have much control over that because there is an editor or some sort of manager that is over you telling you what to do. You are not in a very good career place and you are probably not going to feel a great deal of

satisfaction. But when you move out of that, having become such a good writer that people are coming to you and saying we want you to write for our magazine, or we are willing to give you an advance on a book and you can go and live up in Vermont or Connecticut or someplace and write your book for a year, all expenses paid, well then you start having some passion about your work because you now have control over your creativity, you have control over your autonomy, and you have control over the output. This is what he calls career capital. He talks about it quite a bit in the book.

So when we do this satisfying, fulfilling work (remember I said it was diligent, focused, and progressively higher, better, and more specialized work), when we do that, it gives us this career capital and we can then spend that capital in pursuing goals that are important to us, what we are passionate about. And it is not really until we get to the point where we have control over what we do, that we can do that—where we are masters of our own destiny.

It all boils down to the title of the book. Remember what I said the title of the book was? *So Good They Can't Ignore You*. That is it in a nutshell. You would be surprised where that came from. It was from a Charlie Rose interview on PBS of comedian Steve Martin. Steve Martin was fairly old when he made it big and he is fairly old now. He just had a kid. What is he? 67 or something like that? His first child, and everybody was agog that he had his first kid when he was that old. But anyway, he was one who really worked on his craft. You would not think being a comedian is that hard. But it was. It is a really dog-eat-dog industry and you have got to be really good.

He spent years, I mean literally years, refining his schtick. And when he came on the scene in the early 70s, he hit it big time. He ended up being on Saturday Night Live and doing all that stuff, but he had spent years in small bars and going around to college campuses, refining and refining and refining his act and it got to the point that he became so good they could not ignore him and he shot up the ladder.

And so he said this in answer to the Charlie Rose's question. What career advice would you give young entertainers trying to make it in Hollywood, make in comedy, make it in whatever? And he said, "Become so good that they can't ignore you." So he says, his advice is work hard on improving

your craft until it is so superior to anything else that you can pretty much write your own ticket to success. That is how you will be passionate about what you do, because now you have control.

What he said, if I can put it in my own words (this is also something that I borrowed from Newport), he says that we need to become craftsmen at whatever we have chosen to do. And it could be anything. It does not necessarily have to be nuclear physics. It does not have to be writing books. It does not have to be even playing baseball or something like that. It can begin wherever you are now. And what you do is that you work to be the best at what you do and people will notice. You are not to become just any old craftsman either. I mean, with some of today's tools and things becoming a craftsman may seem to be pretty easy. What Steve Martin is talking about is becoming *the* very best, the top 1% in the field that you have decided to go into. It is really applying ourselves and becoming good, becoming *excellent* at what we do that brings out the passion and the satisfaction.

So really it is the other way around to the way most people think. Most people say be passionate and then these things will come to you. He said, "No. Work hard and then you'll become passionate and good things will come to you."

Obviously, this is a sermon. It is not really the place for career advice but to provide a spiritual lesson. (And that was the introduction.) The rest is a spiritual lesson. Today we are going to take this theme of becoming so good that they cannot ignore you and we are going to apply it to Christian living. God has given us a calling that is so much greater than a career, so much higher, that it is our responsibility to become so good at living God's way that the world will be forced to notice. That they will see you in the world doing God's way and they will get a witness made to them. And by making that witness to the world, we will please God and glorify Him.

Let us turn to Matthew the fifth chapter. We are going to start with the very basics, in the Sermon on the Mount. You know the layout of the Sermon on the Mount, it starts out with the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes start in verse 3 after Matthew lets us know where He was and what He was doing. So we

have verses 3 through 12 as the Beatitudes. They go down through verse 10 or 11, and He makes the comment there in verse 12 and then immediately He goes into verses 13 through 16. It is just the next paragraph.

Now, I do not think this is put there haphazardly. Verses 13 through 16 is almost the answer to a question. I kind of get the idea that Jesus was there with the disciples on the mountain, they were sitting around Him and He was saying "Blessed are the poor in spirit" and blessed are this and blessed are that. And He gets through and there is a small silence, a little bit of a break, and one of the disciples pops up his head and he says, "Well Jesus, then what? What are we to do with these good qualities? So we have His reply here starting in verse 13.

**Matthew 5:13-16** "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden, nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

So we could say this is what you do with the good qualities that God builds up in you through your life. His reply could be, "You must use these things for good and perform them before the world," because these things that He told us to do—to be poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to be merciful, to be peacemakers, to be pure, and all those things—those things are not to be done in a closet. These are positive commands that He has given us here. That is, you are the salt of the earth and you are the light of the world. These are commands that tell us that we are to be doing these things out in the open.

These reveal that Christianity, godly living, the way God lives His life, should not be just a private, personal, and secret way of life. It is not to be something that is to be done in a nunnery somewhere or in an abbey. It is not something that is supposed to be done out in the middle of nowhere where there is no one else around. But God intends that we practice His way in public, in the open, where others can see.



Notice, He gives us really two examples. There is the salt and the light. Now we all know what salt is and we know what it is supposed to do. It is a preservative. It is also a flavoring and when we think about salt we think of it normally in terms of a little dispenser on the table. We shake it out of our salt shaker or we might think of it being carved out of some cave or something. But mostly when we use salt it disappears, does it not? We put it on our food and we cannot see it. A woman will put it in the pot of whatever she is making, a soup or a stew, and it goes into the liquid and you cannot see it anymore.

That is how salt works. You could not look in your body and see all the NaCl that is running through your veins. You might be able to cut yourself and lick the blood and it tastes a little bit salty. But we cannot see salt when it starts working, because when it starts working it disappears into whatever it is and it does its work. So we could be the preservatives of the world, true Christians be preservatives and be flavor for the world and not be seen at all, just like salt.

But try to do that with light. Jesus says, "A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden." When it is dark outside and the lights of the city come on, there is no way you are going to hide that city. They tried to do this during the wars. You know, with lights out and all the blackout stuff that they did on the windows and such. But even so it is very hard to hide the light of a city at night because it shines, and when light shines in darkness you notice the light. Being a light in the world is something you cannot do without being noticed. That is kind of the difference between the two of these examples. One can be done behind the scenes where the other has to be seen. It cannot help to be seen.

So salt can do its work and no one may be the wiser. But light cannot be hidden, Jesus says. Even a little bit of light in a dark place will drive the darkness away. Even a small light, the flame from, let us say, a single matchstick, will be noticed even in a huge dark place. Have you ever gone through a big cavern, you know like Ruby Falls or Carlsbad Cavern or some something like that? And the tour guide will take you down pretty deep and they have got the lights on and you can see all that is going on in the cave, all the stalactites and the stalagmites and you are all going ooh and ahh. And

then the guy turns out all the lights and it is so dark in there and then they light a match and you can see how much light even one match will put out in a huge space like that. It is just incredible. You cannot ignore the light, and the darkness will be driven back by the light.

So even a little bit of godly living, which is what our light is to this world, will attract the attention of people blinded by the god of this world. They cannot help it. It is so different people will notice. So Jesus wants us to give light to the world by the way we live out in public and thereby bring glory to our Father in heaven. He wants us to display His right way to humanity as a witness so that they cannot come before God's judgment and say they never knew. It is our job to go out there and be that witness before the world.

So, if God has tasked us with spreading His light in the world and we are thereby representing God in the world, should we not be the best at it that we could be? If God has given us a sacred duty to be a light in the world, should we not try to be the best and brightest light that there ever was or that we are capable of being? That is the attitude, I am sure, that Christ wants us to have. You have given me this honor. Yes, Lord, I will go out and do it to the best of my ability. So should not our goal, then, as Christians, be to become craftsmen and craftswomen in godly living, the very best we can be, and so good at it that the world cannot ignore us? I think so.

Let us go back to the book of Proverbs, chapter 4. We are going to pick up one verse here. Even way back here there is indication of this "be the light of the world" command in a typical Hebrew way of putting it. But not just be a light in the world, but be the best light you can be. It is a really interesting little verse.

**Proverbs 4:18** But the path of the just is like the shining sun, that shines ever brighter unto the perfect day.

Now, if we could put this in a little bit more modern English, Solomon is telling us that the course of the life of a righteous person is like that of the rising of the sun. Let us think about this for a minute. It is dark, the sun has been gone all night and it is the darkest before the dawn. Right? Is that not

what the old saying is, "It's darkest before the dawn"? Think of that time when it is the darkest, just about ready for the sun to rise, as the time of your calling and God turns the light on in your mind.

Okay, that is where we begin. There is a glow of light just as the sun begins to rise, it is kind of a twilight. It is a bit murky. It is like twilight at the end of the day when the sun is going down and it gets darker and darker and darker. And there is a time when the light and the dark tend to mix and it is a little gray, not quite light and not quite dark. But it does not stop there at twilight. The sun comes over the horizon and it keeps rising. And it keeps rising even after it is fully over the horizon, even though the full ball of the sun is there and you can see it as it is mounting up into the sky from the horizon, and it still keeps rising and it still keeps rising and it gets brighter and brighter and brighter. And by the time noon time comes it is at its fullest, brightest, most glorious.

Solomon is saying that the course, the projection of our lives as righteous people, as Christians, should be like the rising of the sun. It will start fairly dim, but it is supposed to get brighter and brighter, and fuller and more glorious as it gets toward noonday.

It says here in the *New King James* that it shines ever brighter unto the perfect day. It is a poor, rather unfortunate translation. The Hebrew phrase suggests the height or fullness of daylight at noon. So what he is saying here is, the path of the just is like the shining sun that shines ever brighter all the way to its fullest at noon. We are not to be satisfied with what we know now, or what kind of righteousness that we personally may practice now. But our goal, as Solomon says here, our path and the end of our path should be *perfect* righteousness. Not just any old righteousness will do, but God has set a goal of such wonderful challenge, absolute perfection, before us so that we can see where we are headed and really yearn to reach it and *strive* to reach it.

Now, does not Jesus say in Matthew 5:48 that we are to be perfect just as our Father in heaven is perfect? That is righteousness at the noon day, at the fullest extent. Is not our goal very clearly stated in the New Testament to grow into the glorious character image of Jesus Christ? That is the sun at noonday. In fact, in Malachi 4:2, He is called the Sun of Righteousness. That is the kind of life that we are supposed to practice before the world. It is a

huge goal. I mean, we will never get there on our own in this life, but God wants us to work at it and to be craftsmen at His way of life, to display that before the world, and to please Him and glorify Him in our growth. And we all have room to grow, believe me, none of us have attained it.

Let us notice what Paul says here in I Corinthians 3:10. We were here in the sermons that I gave on foundations. I guess it is one of those verses that has been rolling around in my head of late. So I am going to go to it again and try to pull something else out of it, a slightly different application. We will just pull this one scripture out. He says,

**I Corinthians 3:10** According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it.

And then he goes on and talks about Christ is that only foundation and that we are to build on it with gold, silver, precious stones. And if we cannot do that, wood, hay, stubble. It needs to be built on, let us get that straight right away.

But let us notice here that Paul calls himself a wise master builder. And just by using that phrase, you can see that he has this idea in mind as well because what is a wise master builder? A wise master builder at the time, and even now today, would be someone who has a lot of experience in what he is doing and he is very skilled at what he does.

So Paul saw himself as having the education and the experience and the practical skills to be one who could lay a foundation like this for these churches. Because what he would do is, he would go around to these churches, traveling on foot or by ship to these various places, and he would go in there and there would be no other church members maybe in the entire city where he was going. And he would begin preaching publicly and he would gather a crowd and there would be people who would listen and God would call them out of what they were doing and they would be attracted to the church and they would be called and converted.

He would then take that nucleus of people and he would teach them. Sometimes he would stay for six months, sometimes he would stay for a couple of years, but he would teach them the fundamentals of Christianity. He would teach them as well as he could. And of course, he taught the gospel of Jesus Christ. That was the foundation that he had laid. There is no other foundation to be laid, he says, other than Jesus Christ. So he taught them about Jesus Christ and he did it in a very wise, skilled, experienced way so that he could say that he was a wise master builder.

And so he would establish a congregation and everybody in the congregation would have the same foundation because they had all learned under Paul. And then Paul would feel the urge to go out and do this again someplace else. So he would have to leave this congregation in the hands of an elder or one of his proteges, like Timothy or Titus or whoever, and he would then say, "Okay Tim, Titus, whoever, take this church and build on what I've laid here as a foundation." And then he gives this: "But let each one take heed how he builds on it!" He wanted to make sure that the work that he did on that foundation, as perfect as he could make it as a human being inspired by God's Spirit, would not produce a bad superstructure. So the next person who came along, whether it was Apollos or whoever, would have to do this job and try to reach the same level of skill and expertise of the apostle Paul in building on top of that foundation.

You can see that Paul had this idea in mind that if we are going to approach Christian living at all, we better approach it with the idea of being a wise master builder. We do not want to just slap anything on the foundation of Jesus Christ. We have to be so good that they cannot ignore us, whoever they happen to be. We have to be craftsmen and craftswomen in the way that we learn and grow in this Christian way of life. Because Jesus gave His all for us, we better do the same and give our all for Him and for the Father.

So Paul gave these people the very best in care, in teaching, in counseling, in encouragement, in the way of righteousness. He was the spiritual craftsman if there ever was one among humanity.

Now, clearly in this way he is looking at it, he is speaking to ministers, he is speaking to those who would come after him and have to build on his

foundation. So ministers should be very careful in their roles in doing this, in building on the foundation. But this idea applies just as much to the individual church member because he or she also builds on the foundation. It is not just the minister's job. In fact, the minister may get his cracks in once a week, but you have to do it every day. And so the responsibility of building on the foundation really lies on the individual Christian's shoulder and the minister is a helper. Paul even calls the ministry helpers of your joy at one point. But it is *your* joy and it is *your* work and it is *your* craftsmanship that is going to build up your Christian life to being so good that they cannot ignore you.

So this admonition here, "but let each one take heed how he builds on it," is not just for the minister's ears, but also for the individual Christians ears. Be careful how you use the Word of God and how you live the Word of God, because it is founded on Jesus Christ.

And then he goes on to say down in verse 12, that we will clearly build on it with differing levels of quality. Not everyone is going to be building on it with gold or with silver or with costly jewels. Some are just going to have to do as well as they can, but they should be doing *as well as they can* with what they have. They are to be applying as much of what has been given to them, and especially the gifts that have been given them, to make sure that what they build on the foundation is good and solid and will last through the trials. That, he says, will reveal what kind of building has been built.

It is plain that we should be aiming on building with gold and silver and precious stones. We should be aiming to build with the finest things, the highest quality things with the greatest craftsmanship, because this is God's building that we are talking about, God's temple, and there should be no shoddy workmanship on God's temple.

Let us go over a few pages here to the book of Philippians to chapter 3. (I am always tempted to say flip to Philippians.) Paul presents a different metaphor here. He leaves behind the master builder metaphor and he goes to something else but the principle remains the same.

**Philippians 3:12-16** [he says] Not that I have already attained [meaning attained the resurrection because he had just spoken of

that in verse 11], or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended [or have arrived at anything]; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature [meaning spiritually mature], have this in mind; if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind.

The metaphor that he uses here, he switches from building a building to running a race, yet what lingers out of sight in both of these metaphors, both of these illustrations, is the fact that the building has not been finished yet. The race is not over. We have not crossed the finish line. In the building metaphor we have not cut the tape to open up the building, and in the same way, in the running race, we have not crossed the finish line. We have not cut that tape either. So there is this idea that there is unfinished business to be done, that we are in the middle of something, not at the end. We are in the middle of it. We will not get to the end until God says it is the end.

So we are smack dab in the middle of the race. We are still under construction. There are more laps that need to be run in this race. We are not on the gun lap. We do not know where we are. It may be our gun lap if our life is about ready to expire, but we do not know what lap we are on. There is still more race to be run. James Burton Kaufman, who is a commentator, writes in his commentary on this passage,

Paul never viewed the Christian prize of eternal salvation as being something that one might get in any final and irrevocable act. The Pauline view in evidence here was that the Christian life was a race to be won. A life to be lived, a course to be completed, and that no one ever had it made until the probation of life was completed.

That you had to finish, you had complete what had been given you to complete. And so Paul says in this passage here in Philippians 3, he pressed on to lay hold of the prize that Christ had yanked him out of the world to

win, or to attain. That is the imagery here. When he says here, "I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me," it is a very, almost violent action in the Greek. That Christ had reached down and just yanked him out of the world with one hand and said, "this is what you're doing now and you better attain it!"

Paul was the one that was out on the Damascus road minding his own business, as he might say, just going to Damascus to go imprison some Christians; all in a day's work, and right in the middle of the road, God brings him up short, blinds him, and converts him in about 15 seconds. And at that point Paul is ready to give everything he has got to his new Lord. And that is the way he did that throughout the rest of his life. He still had that same feeling, that if Christ reached down and yanked me out of what I was doing and kept me from killing my fellow Christians any more than what he had done, that he would give his *all*, he would *press* toward the mark, he says, of the upward call because that is what Jesus Christ expected of him—because Jesus Christ had given His all. Now he, Paul, had to give his all.

So Paul felt that he owed Christ the same enthusiasm and conviction and strenuous effort in the task that Christ had laid out for him to fulfill. As he had mentioned earlier, without regrets, without complaint, and he said that he thought all of what he had done before as refuse, as trash to be thrown away. It was not worth even thinking about. But he said he would orient himself toward the future. He says he is looking ahead here. Not back, there is no good in that. But he is looking ahead toward that upward call. He is focused toward what he can still do, what he can still attain. So he is looking, he is oriented toward the future and toward the Kingdom of God. And he pressed on.

A very interesting image, he pressed on. The image here is of a runner in a race. It is not a sprint, it is a long distance race. It is like a marathon where you just have to keep on running and it looks like you are never going to get to the end because it is such a long race. But this runner knows that he is approaching the finish line. He does not know necessarily how far he has to go, but he knows that it is there in front of him and he knows that it is fairly close. Instead of easing up and coasting to victory, no one else is around him, he has outpaced everyone. And this is what Paul had done.



I would have to say, that after Jesus Christ, Paul must have been the greatest Christian ever. At least we have his writings that tell us that he was quite a man. But let us just use that, that Paul had outstripped everyone in his devotion to God and doing the work of God. And he was out there running and pumping his legs trying to get to the finish line and he could look around and he could say, no one else is around me, I can ease up. I am going to make it. I could just coast to the finish line. But no, Paul is not the kind of man that would do that. He did not ease up.

This *pressed on* implies that he *lunged forward* and put every ounce of energy that was still left in him to cross that finish line under power. Sprinting. He was not going to just coast or walk up to the finish line, he was going to go through big and he was going to win with as big a margin as he could possibly win by. He is not satisfied with just finishing. He wants to win by a huge margin.

Now, if we are mature in our Christianity, he says, because it always comes back around to us, we will have this mind, he says. I am going to teach you a new word today, it will not be new for everyone, but probably new for most of you. The word is *syzygy*. It looks funny, does it not? That is because it is Greek. It means "in conjunction" or "in union." Literally in the Greek it means "yoked together" and as a matter of fact it is used in the Bible in this particular book. Chapter 4, verse 3, where it says, "I urge you, true companion." The word true companion is that word in whatever Greek form it is. But it means one who has been yoked to me and we are on the same path. We are doing this together.

So in a way Paul is hinting here that we are all kind of yoked together in this race because we are not in competition with each other. We are all pulling to the same goal. We are trying to all reach the end of the same road. So we need to be in union as mature Christians and all be pulling at the same level of intensity. We should all be *pressing on* to the Kingdom of God. Not one slower and not one faster, but all with the same enthusiasm and dedication and desire to get to the finish line and please God and make a witness for Him. He is inspiring us all to finish strong. No matter what part of our Christian life we happen to be in, we should all be aligned together in this effort in striving to attain the Kingdom of God and that will produce the greatest growth and more importantly, the greatest glory to God.

I know Lance Armstrong is not thought of very highly, but his foundation is called Live Strong, the Live Strong Foundation. He no longer has anything to do with it because of his disgrace. But that is the way he approached life after his cancer. After he came close enough to death to realize that if you are going to live, you might as well live strong. And this is kind of the idea that Paul is giving us also, but he wants us to live strong for God and to press on, press forward, to lunge towards the finish line and not just coast.

However stellar as the apostle Paul was in what he did as a Christian, he is not our prime example. As a matter of fact, he pales in comparison to our real example, Jesus Christ. Our real example is our Savior. As I mentioned, He is the Son of Righteousness as well as the Son of God and believe it or not, He did not come out of Mary's womb shining the light of God at full strength. He had to learn, He had to grow. Even He, the Son of God, had to grow in His ability to glorify God. Did you know that? I am sure you did. But sometimes we do not realize it because we think of Him as our glorified Savior, the one who gives us salvation because He lives and He has got all this power and He had all the righteousness and the ability through obedience to glorify God the way He did. But He did not start out that way. That was the godly side of Him. He had to deal with the human side of Himself as well.

Let us go to Luke 2. I want to just show this to you. This is kind of funny from the standpoint that it puts us all to shame because we are talking about a mere child here. I mean He was somewhere between infant and 12 years old and this is what is said about Him.

**Luke 2:39-40** So when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord [meaning Joseph and Mary], they returned to Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.

Notice, like I said, this was before that wonderful thing that happened in the Temple where He astounded the teachers there. So he was somewhere between 40 days and 12 years old when this was said about Him. It said that He "became." Notice the wording here. He *became* strong in spirit and we

can take that verb with it. He *became* filled with wisdom. The comma there is they are showing us that a word has been left out and it is the word became. That is just an English thing. If you use part of one clause this way and then you repeat it with another similar clause but you leave out a word, then you put a comma there to show that you are using other things from the previous clause. So the way it should read here then is, "He became strong in spirit and became filled with wisdom." The New Testament commentary by William Hendrickson, and Simon Kistemaker translates this verse as, "and the Child continued to grow and to become strong, being filled day by day with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him."

So what Luke is showing here, that as He grew physically, He also grew in wisdom and in God's Spirit. Now He had the Spirit without measure. He could have as much as He wanted from God. It was flowing to Him. But He, over His adolescence, became more and more filled with the Spirit and more and more filled with wisdom. He grew just like you and I are to grow. He was not just placed on earth here and suddenly He was God in the flesh. Well, He was God in the flesh, but He was not glorious in the way that He later became in terms of wisdom and His use of God's Spirit and glorifying God. Even He had to learn and to mature despite having the Spirit without measure and being the very Son of God. Do you not think we should do that as well if He did it?

Hebrews 2:10 says that He was *made* perfect through suffering. That means He was matured. He was made mature, made complete through sufferings. His way was not easy either. Hebrews 5:8 says He learned obedience through suffering. So He had to learn these things. He had to go through trials. He had to have sufferings happen to Him, even as a child, to grow, to learn wisdom, to learn right ways to do things. Of course, most of that probably took place later when He was more mature and more able to make the connections.

Across the page here in verse 51,

**Luke 2:51-52** Then He went down with them and came to Nazareth [this was after the Temple incident where He astounded the teachers there in the Temple with His wisdom, with His answers, and he says Jesus], was subject to them [Joseph and

Mary], but His mother kept all these things in her heart. [verse 52 is what I really want] And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

So this is another example of His growth. He continued to grow even after He was 12. You think, a 12 year old with God's Spirit without measure, He was pretty much what He was going to be. But no, He kept on growing, kept on growing in wisdom. He got smarter, smarter in the way He attacked problems, smarter in the way that He worked with things, worked with people. He learned wisdom. Wisdom is the application of knowledge and understanding. So He learned how to apply Himself in ways that would make things work in His ministry and so that He could glorify God even more.

But what I want you to notice here is that not only God gave Him favor, but this growth in wisdom and in stature was noticed by other people. It says here, "He grew in favor with God and men." You put someone like Jesus Christ out in public and people are going to notice. They are going to say, "Wow, this guy is something! He does everything right. He never makes a mistake, He always knows what to say, He always knows what to do. He's always helping these people." He is always doing this and He was always doing everything good and right and people noticed, and people liked Him because He was so wonderful. He was so good they could not ignore Him. He lived God's way of life perfectly that everyone, at this time, thought well of Him.

Let us go to John 7, which is later in His life, during His ministry. He is coming to the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem and the people all know about Him, everyone seems to have known about who He was and everyone had an opinion about Him.

**John 7:25-26** Then some of them from Jerusalem said, "Is this not He whom they seek to kill? But look! He speaks boldly and they say nothing to Him. Do the rulers know indeed that this is truly the Christ?"

See, they recognized who He was. There were people that realized this can only be the Messiah. Look how He lives, look how He speaks, look at the

miracles He has done. But He was doing things like this, helping people, curing them of what they thought was incurable diseases and afflictions, but He was able to do it. It has got to be the Messiah! Then they have problems there.

**John 7:27** "However, we know where this Man is from; but when the Christ comes, no one knows where He is from."

They are confusing themselves.

**John 7:30-32** Therefore they sought to take Him, but no one laid a hand on Him, because His hour had not yet come. And many of the people believed in Him, and said, "When the Christ comes, will He do more signs than these which this Man has done?" The Pharisees heard the crowd murmuring these things concerning Him, and the Pharisees and the chief priests sent officers to take Him.

**John 7:40-47** Therefore many from the crowd, when they heard this saying, said, "Truly this is the Prophet." Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Will the Christ come out of Galilee? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the seed of David and from the town of Bethlehem, where David was?" So there was a division among the people because of Him. Now some of them wanted to take Him, but no one laid hands on Him? Then the officers came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why have you not brought Him?" The officers answered, "No man ever spoke like this Man!" The Pharisees answered them, "Are you also deceived?"

What we are seeing here at this time in His ministry is that people knew who He was and they were astounded at Him. Some people were proclaiming Him to be the Christ and they were right. But others were saying, no, we need to kill Him. We need to kill Him because He is doing all these things against the law, as they saw it. Or you know, this Man cannot be the right one because He does not hail from the right place. And they did not know He was from the right place. And they were arguing over Him.

And of course the Pharisees, who were watching all of these things going on from their places behind the people, they wanted to kill Him because He was putting them to shame! His light was so bright that they looked awfully dim in comparison. And of course He was attracting these crowds, and when you attract crowds, you attract the Romans' attention and the Romans were probably going to do something about it if things got out of hand. And these Pharisees, because they were not doing their job and controlling the people, they would be out of it, they would lose what they had gained. And they did not want to lose their cushy positions under the Romans and so they conspired to arrest and crucify Him, and in doing so, they unwittingly made it possible for Christ to glorify the Father in the ultimate way. They were being used. And it also made it possible for Jesus Himself to be glorified. Notice what it says in chapter 13 after Judas leaves the upper room.

**John 13:31-32** So, when he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in Him. If God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and glorify Him immediately."

The stage was set. Everything was going to transpire the way that God had set it out to transpire, and God would be glorified and Christ would be glorified. He had lived His life the way God had wanted and He would end His life the way God had wanted, and He would bring glory to both the Father and to Himself by doing so.

That is our example. From start to finish, Jesus' life was one of growth and of being out there living the life of God in the world, being the light. He is the light. And He showed us how to do it. Now in John chapter 15, He not only showed us how to do it, but He is helping us do it now.

**John 15:1-8** "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away. [that gives us an idea how important it is for us to be growing and bearing fruit] Every branch that bears fruit He prunes [so we are going to get some tests and trials to make sure that we grow and we produce the fruit that He wants to see], that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of

itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit [so either sets the level high. We are not just to bear fruit, we are to bear *much* fruit]; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. [Not only are you cut off, but you are gathered into a fire and burned if you do not produce fruit. Pretty serious stuff we are talking about here.] If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so will you be My disciples."

So we will follow in His footsteps.

Our calling and our baptism initiates us into something far greater than a mere career. We have been chosen to produce *much* fruit to glorify the Father. That is the job. That is what we have been tasked to do. And in order to do this, we have been grafted into Christ, the vine—God Himself—to give us the ability to grow spiritually and produce pleasing fruit for the Father, for otherwise we could not do anything.

So it does not matter what our background is, how old we are, what our educational level is, whether we are male or female, rich or poor, whatever the circumstance may be. Because Christ is in us. And because He is in us, we can now be so good at Christian living that they cannot ignore us.